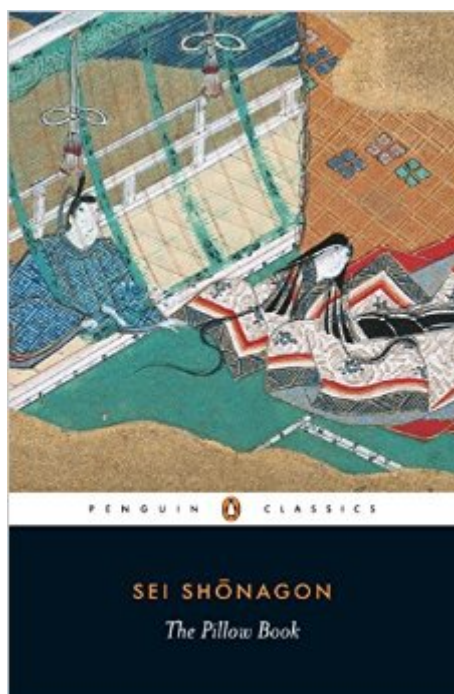


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The Pillow Book (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The classic portrayal of court life in tenth-century Japan. Written by the court gentlewoman Sei Shonagon, ostensibly for her own amusement, *The Pillow Book* offers a fascinating exploration of life among the nobility at the height of the Heian period, describing the exquisite pleasures of a confined world in which poetry, love, fashion, and whim dominated, while harsh reality was kept firmly at a distance. Moving elegantly across a wide range of themes including nature, society, and her own flirtations, Sei Shonagon provides a witty and intimate window on a woman's life at court in classical Japan. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

I first discovered *The Pillow Book*, quite by accident, at age 19 in a pile of books a college roommate had left behind. It quickly revealed an unknown world of absolute beauty and a life lived as art to my young mind, a world in which the mere examination of a particular color of a mountaintop at sunset or the blink of a firefly winging its way through the first moments of a misty dusk, the small tragedy of a fire reduced to dying embers, are interpreted and elevated to their

proper place as the miracles of a life well-observed. Sei Shonagans's observations concerning a sheet of clean, properly produced paper, for example, becomes an allegory for the importance of elegance in all things, the necessity of a thing well done, the small choices that define our place in the world and the infinite possibilities of an ordinary day. But she doesn't limit her journal, for that is what this is, thus the title, to the minute. She freely and whole-heartedly chronicles the daily doings of palace life, unfettered and uncensored--she wrote in secret, living with the dire danger that she be found out--from the grandest and most complex internecine details of royal ceremonies and celebrations to the delicious gossip of secret romantic affairs of high and low society. There are many passages that are frankly hilarious. The ironies and duplicities of human behavior, it is comforting to discover, were as much a part of the ancient world as they are today. Decadence is timeless, and ever divine, then and now. She is quick in her disapprovals, and, one suspects, takes great delight in chronicling the scandals of the day. This is a book to hold close at hand.

Relatively little is known about Sei Shonagon's life. We know she was a court lady in tenth-century Japan, at the pinnacle of the Heian period. And she left behind a glimpse into her culture's period in "The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon." It's a sort of mishmash memoir -- gossip, reflections, lists, and personal recollections are all mingled together, with a light, poetic delicacy that still is striking today. The story behind the Pillow Book is that when Shonagon (possible real name: Kiyohara Nagiko) was serving the Imperial Family, the Empress Teishi received a bunch of notebooks that she couldn't use. As they were too valuable to discard, she gave them to Shonagon to use as she chose. And so Shonagon basically poured her thoughts into her "Pillow Book" -- she offers brief reflections on the world around her, diary-like recollections of things that happen among the ladies in waiting, essays on court life, lists, poetry, and pretty much anything else she dreamed up. One of the most intriguing things about the Pillow Book is the glimpse into tenth-century Japan that it gives. Shonagon's stories are about little things like flutes, disobedient dogs, clothes, and the Empress's ladies betting on how long it would take a giant mound of snow to melt (no, I'm not kidding). Somehow, it leaves the past seeming a little less distant. Normally these stories would be curiosities only. But Shonagon -- despite her tendency towards snobbery -- had a special knack with prose, and a bright, shimmering wit. Her charming love of beauty is often enchanting; she often lists things that she finds pleasing, such as moons, summer nights, flowers and willow trees.

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